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ABSTRACT

The Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security (SRKCS) Act, voted into law in late 1990, requires colleges and universities to disclose graduation rates and statistics on campus crime. For institutions offering sub-baccalaureate vocational and technical degrees, the Act supersedes Track Record Disclosure (TRD) Regulations requiring institutions to provide information pertaining to graduation, job placement, and successful completion of licensure and certification tests. Among the problematic aspects of the SRKCS Act are that it does not offer operational definitions of graduation rates, explain how to calculate success rates for incoming transfer students, describe disclosure procedures, or consider the vast research literature on the inputs, processes, and outcomes of the undergraduate experience. Other concerns about the SRKCS requirements relate to their fairness, usefulness, and costs, and the possibilities for misusing information and overextending a college's capacity to manipulate the required data. In an effort to determine how successfully different institutions handle such legislative requirements, and to shed light on the feasibility of implementing the SRKCS Act, surveys were sent to 320 two-year institutions nationwide requesting information on their responses to the previous TRD Regulations. Usable responses were received from 124 institutions for a 39% response rate. The study found that while 56.8% of the responding institutions stated that they were in compliance with the TRD Regulations, responses to individual survey questions revealed that only 31% had actually met the requirements of compliance. In addition, the responding institutions that had calculated graduation rates reported a variety of divergent methodological approaches and interpretations of the wording of the TRD Regulations. (PAA)

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Implementation of the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act: What We Can Learn from Experiences with Track Record Disclosure Requirements

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Implementation of the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act: What We Can Learn from Experiences with Track Record Disclosure Requirements

SUMMARY

The Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act requires colleges and universities to provide data to students reflecting graduation rates and campus crimes. The law supersedes Track Record Disclosure Regulations for nonbaccalaureate vocational and technical programs that in many ways paralleled the new requirements. This paper builds upon the experiences of community, technical and junior colleges with the Track Record Disclosure Regulations to inform the regulation development process for implementation of the new law.

A national survey of associate degree-granting institutions revealed that there was wide latitude taken in interpretation of the Track Record Disclosure Regulations. Even so, only slightly more than half of the respondents reported their institutions to be in compliance with the regulations. Examination of specific aspects of the responses determined the true compliance rate to be closer to 30%.

This paper highlights many of the issues that should be considered for clarification in development of regulations for implementation of the Student Right-to-Know provisions, so that we can learn from the experience of the Track Record Disclosure Regulations, and avoid the pitfalls encountered under the previous requirements.

THE REQUIREMENTS

In late 1990, a new law known as the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act came into being. This law will require all colleges to disclose graduation rates and statistics on campus crime. As part of the law, the Secretary of Education was directed to study the feasibility of requiring the disclosure of additional statistical information representing the outcomes of the college experience.

This paper addresses the aspects of the law that pertain to academic outcomes. The requirements with respect to campus security appear to present potential difficulties, but a detailed analysis of them is outside the author's area of expertise.

The new law suspended regulations that required what was known as Track Record Disclosure of institutions offering nonbaccalaureate vocational or technical programs. The Track Record Disclosure Regulations required these institutions to provide entering students with information pertaining to graduation, job placement, and successful completion of occupational licensure and certification tests. These areas parallel in large measure the requirements of the new law, as well as the types of information proposed for the feasibility study to be undertaken by the Department of Education.

Regulations will certainly be written to operationalize the details of the new requirements. Community, technical, and junior colleges had direct experience with the Track Record Disclosure Regulations that should serve as an important proving ground for the implementation of Student Right-to-Know requirements for all colleges and universities. Both the regulatory process and the study of feasibility should be informed by the experiences of institutions as they attempted to comply with these similar requirements.

THE ISSUES

Numerous aspects of this initiative are potentially troublesome. Prominent among them are:

DEFINITIONS

Actual calculation of graduation rates requires numerous definitional and methodological decisions to be made by the researcher. Interpretation of the legislation without clear regulations on how to institute them would leave wide latitude for deciding how to approach the requirements, and how to calculate the rates. Different colleges would reasonably be able to produce results based on highly dissimilar definitions.

The act specifies that students included in the rates are to be "full time upon entry." It excludes students who enter as part-timers. It also doesn't address whether to retain students in the study if they drop below full time status or have intermittent attendance (stopouts). The Track Record Disclosure Regulations allowed a proration for part-time attendance.

The definition of "full-time student" is subject to interpretation. This might pertain to 12 or 15 credits. It is not clear whether only college level credits are to be considered, or if courses offering remediation of deficiencies in basic skills are to be included in the total. These courses make up large portions of the instruction of several types of institutions.

The specification of length of program leaves room for variability. In some

institutions the average student normally graduates in a time frame that is different from that which might be specified in the college catalog. In many institutions students have to complete a considerable of remedial work before they can progress toward a degree. Some students come to college without the ability to speak, read or write English. These students may take years before they even begin to make progress toward a degree. The distributions of these types of students are not similar across institutions. They are far more predominant at urban institutions, at community colleges, and at colleges that serve a large minority or underprivileged population.

Whether or not to include transfers into the institution is not specified. If they are to be included, no guidelines are given as to whether their expected dates of graduation should be prorated dependent upon the number of credits they bring when they enter.

Students who transfer out are apparently to be counted as successes, as long as they transfer to "an eligible institution for which the prior program provides substantial preparation." The meaning of this phrase is subject to interpretation.

Verification of whether nongraduating leavers have enrolled in another institution presents a logistical challenge. Accumulating transfer data through inter-institutional data files in various states or large systems will probably be feasible but cumbersome, since up to six years worth of registration tapes for all the colleges would have to be concatenated and scanned for evidence of transfer. Such an analysis would not capture any students who transferred outside of the particular area covered by the state or system. If a decision rule has to be individually applied to determine whether the student had been "substantially prepared" for the subsequent program, this method could be subject to severe limitations. An alternative approach, with other limitations, is for the individual institution to undertake a survey of nongraduating, nonpersisting students shortly before the data collection period is scheduled to close. This would present the usual set of problems inherent in survey research, most prominently the difficulty in obtaining responses.

The Track Record Disclosure Regulations specified that rates were to be calculated individually by field of study. This created problems for institutions to determine exactly what constituted enrollment in a program of study. Some colleges developed a "key course" methodology, in which students were not counted as having enrolled in a curriculum until they registered for a key course in the sequence required for the curriculum. The requirement to report rates for individual fields of study is not present in the Student Right-to-Know regulations, but is listed as one of the areas to be assessed for feasibility.

METHOD OF DISCLOSURE

The method by which the data are to be distributed or made available is not specified by the legislation. The only mention is that the data "shall be available" before enrollment. This could be operationalized by anything from the stringent plan of the Track Record Disclosure Regulations (where each student was required to sign a piece of paper indicating that they had received the disclosures and a copy was to be kept in the student's file), to publication in the college catalog or student handbook, or to a piece of paper held by the registrar that is only available for examination by individual students upon specific request. Without clear guidance, colleges may make good faith efforts to provide the rates, but be told at a later date that their procedures are not acceptable.

VALIDITY

A strong question persists regarding whether this approach accurately reflects the outcomes of a college experience. Much scholarly work has been done attempting to quantify college outcomes. For example, several regional accrediting bodies have placed considerable emphasis on this topic, and the member colleges have found it to be an exceedingly complex initiative to implement. Substitution of a crude measure such as an overall graduation rate for duly considered complex measures represents a decision to ignore an entire body of research and practice.

FAIRNESS

The proposed measures do not fairly represent the variations between colleges. Any measure of college outcomes must account for the educational and economic circumstances of the student body. This is especially pertinent in the case of urban universities, as well as community colleges. An abundance of research exists that demonstrates in detail how this complex issue should be approached. In order to fare better on the required measure, colleges would be encouraged to turn away students who are at risk. This runs counter to the mission of many colleges and universities.

USEFULNESS

Serious doubts exist as to whether provision of this information will have the intended effect on student behaviors. The rates are misleading and might not be interpretable by students. Student decisions to enroll at particular institutions are based on a wide range of factors. It is speculative to assume that this information will modify students' college choices.

MISUSE OF INFORMATION

The potential for misuse of this information must also be recognized. Disclosure of information without the proper context for interpretation may lead to distortion. Provision of graduation rate data leaves open the possibility that Congress may eventually want to tie an institution's eligibility for participation in financial aid programs to this information, and any proposal to use these figures for that purpose would be a cause of great concern. There is also the possibility that the information may appear in the public media, and have a negative impact on student and faculty morale. Institutions have valid reasons to worry that they may be held to an unfair standard, or that inappropriate comparisons may be made among institutions.

COST

The community colleges had some experience with the difficulties of complying with the Track Record Disclosure Regulations. Regardless of the extent to which they were able to comply with all of the requirements, all found that it required the application of considerable resources to develop the needed information. Several respondents to a survey (see below) reported that they had "spent all summer" developing the data needed to comply with the Track Record Disclosure requirements. According to the 1990-91 Chronicle of Higher Education survey of median salaries of college and university administrators, the median salary of Directors of Institutional Research is $47,290. If an institutional researcher spent one month developing a response to the legislation, the cost to the institution would be nearly $4,000. If he or she spent "all summer" working on it, the cost could be $8,000. This reflects only the cost of the time of the principal analyst. Attendant costs such as survey mailing and data processing could lead the total costs to be several times greater than the cost of the analyst's time alone. The data are to be updated "not less than biennially." This cost could be expected to decrease somewhat after the first cycle, but if extensive surveys are necessary, they would not diminish greatly.

Many public and private institutions are facing severe financial difficulties. In this period of financial difficulty, and in the presence of other considerable requirements for the external reporting of college data, it seems questionable to commit scarce resources to provide information with uncertain accuracy, fairness, and usefulness.

CAPABILITY

Colleges vary considerably in their capacity to manipulate the required data for research purposes. A recent national study of community college responses (see below) to the recently suspended similar regulations estimated the compliance rate

at somewhere between 30 and 50 percent, depending on what measure was considered. It is clear that the individual institutions impacted by this legislation have variant data resources to bring to bear upon the problem.

THE SURVEY

In view of the controversy about the Track Record Disclosure Regulations, and the variations in institutional responses to them, it was decided to undertake a systematic survey of these approaches. The original purpose of the survey was to improve individual institutions' ability to determine how to respond to the requirements by providing a clear description of how other institutions facing the same requirements have dealt with them. At present it seems fortuitous that the survey was undertaken, for the results may prove very informative for the process moving forward under the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act.

After consultation with the Chair of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Data Advisory Board, AIR's President, and with an individual with research responsibility at the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, the author requested and received a set of mailing labels from AIR of all members who were designated on their records as representing community or junior colleges. A total of 339 member names were received, although some of them had to be discarded because they were Canadian (Canada is not known to have established such regulations), or seemed to represent individuals at four-year institutions. The eventual total number of questionnaires mailed out (320) included some additional names that were suggested by respondents to the initial mailing as individuals to whom the survey should be sent.

A total of 124 usable surveys were returned, for a 39% response rate. The responses represented institutions from all regions of the country. The results showed that only 56.8% asserted their institutions to be in compliance with the regulations. Those who did claim to be in compliance took wide latitude in their interpretations of the methodological requirements and their attempts to make their methods approximate what they believed the requirements to be. Many reported themselves to be in compliance with the "spirit," if not the "letter" of the regulations. Several individuals asserted that the ability of their institution to comply was strongly influenced by the context of the resources and organization of the data available to them. Many other individuals took the opportunity to object to the requirements, and questioned their fairness and usefulness.

When questioned about several individual aspects of compliance with the Track Record Disclosure Regulations, a smaller percentage of respondents reported that they had met the requirements. In order to be in strict compliance, an institution would have had to canvass nonreturning students to determine whether they were employed. Of the total group of respondents, only 31% reported

that they had surveyed nonreturning students in calculating job placement rates. Therefore, the true compliance rate was in all likelihood much lower than the 57% who claimed to have met the requirements of the regulations.

Most of those who did calculate graduation rates used a cohort approach, wherein a group of students who entered in a particular year were followed for the prescribed period of time (and the definitions of the time period varied). However, there were 22 identifiably different definitions of the base cohort that were employed among the 56 respondents who reported themselves to have used a cohort approach. These ranged from "complex 5-year rolling cohorts based on expected dates of graduation," to including in the study only those students who applied in the fall semester for graduation in the immediately following spring. All believed they were implementing the same regulations. Most replied that they believed they had chosen the appropriate cohort, or if not, that they had chosen a sample for reasons of data capacity, availability, or convenience. A few respondents replied, "What's a cohort?" Clearly, the data, as well as the research analytic capabilities, vary widely across institutions.

Finally, the respondents were questioned as to whether their institutions were the members of a multicampus system or affiliated with a state, regional, or other coordinating body. Approximately 75% responded affirmatively, and among these individuals, 85% expressed the desire to see a standardized approach suggested by their coordinating body, in the absence of clear federal guidelines. Many reported that they knew of interest on the part of their coordinating body to come to some type of agreement with the Department of Education as to what would be acceptable responses to the regulations. It was reported that the States of Illinois and Washington achieved this kind of arrangement.

These results highlight the fact that many state, system, or other coordinating bodies collect this information, and may well be in the position to provide many of the desired results. The Department of Education would be well advised to seek the input of these bodies and attempt to make the regulations as consonant as possible with the definitions they use to collect data and their analytic capabilities.

CONCLUSION

No one is arguing that the disclosure of meaningful information on college outcomes to students is a bad thing. However, many would argue that simple graduation rates do not represent that kind of meaningful information. Nevertheless, disclosure of graduation rates is now required under the law. That being the case, the survey results confirm that the Track Record Disclosure Regulations were worded too ambiguously, and that numerous methodological complications were unanticipated.

Perhaps more importantly, this kind of methodology is based on a set of assumptions that ignores an entire body of research on the inputs, processes, and outcomes of the undergraduate experience. The potential benefits of this law are not at all certain to be achieved, and there is significant risk that disclosure of information in the proposed manner will have unintended negative effects.

If we can learn from the experience of the problems of institutional compliance with the Track Record Disclosure Regulations described in detail above, perhaps regulations can be developed for implementation of the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act that will help institutions avoid the pitfalls encountered under the previous requirements. Even so, unforeseen difficulties are sure to arise in implementation of the initiative, and a mere fine-tuning of the methodology will not overcome the fundamental problems of validity, fairness, usefulness, and resource availability afflicting this legislation.

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